

The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China

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Paper Prepared for the International Labor and Employment Relations Conference, Philadelphia, July
2-5.

Abstract

The argument in the paper is that there is a seismic change in labor protest in China. Whereas strikes and protests were largely defensive in nature, focused on protecting current rights and benefits, we find that since 2008, the number of strikes have increased, and Chinese workers are striking for “bread and butter issues”, i.e. more money and more respect from employers. We demonstrate this change by examining strikes using new data that we have collected, and from interviews with employment relations stakeholders as well as two small case studies of strikes in manufacturing. We explain this change by arguing, consistent with McAdam’s political model, that economic and political opportunities such as the labor shortage, new labor laws, and new media openness in China creates responses by actors that serve as cognitive cues for workers to be more assertive in their demands.

The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China

Introduction

Chinese workers are increasingly striking over wages and working conditions, without reference to legal minimums or fading Mao-era social contracts, a sign that labor relations in China are beginning to converge with patterns elsewhere in the world. In June 2010, roughly 1,700 workers at a Honda plant in Zhongshan in Guangdong, making mirrors and door locks went on strike, demanding higher wages and a more representative union—the third Honda plant to do so in less than a month. In addition to their salary and voice demands, the workers complained about having to stand for eight hours a day without speaking to each other and about short bathroom breaks. The strike was coordinated by workers themselves, and took place without the involvement or help of the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). The incident began when a female employee was treated in a humiliating fashion: a security guard denied her entry to the plant because her ID card was improperly attached to her shirt and when she protested, the guard pushed her to the ground (Bradsher 2010). More recently, in January 2012, over 2,000 workers at the state-owned Pangang Group Chengdu Steel and Vanadium Company, Ltd. in the Qingbaijing district of Chengdu, went on strike, demanding higher wages, but also the dismissal of “lazy, redundant personnel” (managers) and more stable contracts (China Labor Watch 2012). The Honda and Pangang cases were different in several aspects: the workers involved were, respectively, migrants from the countryside and local residents; the factories’ ownership, respectively, foreign-private and state-owned; and their location, the southeastern coast that has benefited the most from market reforms and the late-developing interior. Nonetheless, the workers’ responses in both cases were surprisingly similar and epitomize an emerging trend in Chinese labor relations.

In this paper, we argue that there is a seismic shift underway in the underlying basis of worker protest, i.e. what workers strike about. Drawing on specially constructed data in the absence of government statistics, we show that the number of strikes are large and increasing, are occurring in a variety of industries, and are distributed across all regions. In contrast to prior research that viewed worker protests and strikes as reactive and defensive actions by workers (see Lee 2007), we draw on two mini-case studies of strikes and a variety of interviews to suggest that Chinese workers use strikes

pro-actively to further their economic demands and improve contract terms and conditions. Not only is there more focus on bread and butter issues, but there is also an increased demand for more respect from employers. We explain this new assertiveness on the part of Chinese workers with reference to a “political process” model adapted from McAdam (1999), arguing that structural and political opportunities (such as changes in the economy and labor force, notably a growing labor shortage, and changes in the country's “political opportunity structure,” including new labor laws and new government policies on “mass incidents” and press freedom) provide workers with cognitive cues that they have increased leverage and space to press their claims, leading to new demands and fresh tactics.

In the sections that follow, we review the prior literature on Chinese worker protests and strikes, including the legality of striking in China. We then articulate our argument, followed by a discussion of our methodology and data. Using case studies from two manufacturing strikes in the 2010-2011 period, and interviews with a variety of Chinese employment relations actors, our analysis provides support for our argument that there is a qualitative change in the causes of Chinese strikes.

PRIOR LITERATURE

Chinese workers have a long history of industrial action and activism, from general strikes in the foreign- and warlord-controlled Shanghai of the pre-revolutionary era (Perry 1993), through activism during the Communist Party takeover of cities and urban enterprises in the early 1950s (Frazier 2002), a relatively little-known strike wave during the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957 (Perry 1994), dramatic factory seizures at the height of the Cultural Revolution (Perry and Xun 1997), protests over the early market dislocations of the 1980s and 1990s (Solinger 2009), participation in the 1976 Tiananmen Incident and the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement (both in Beijing and elsewhere), and resistance to lay-offs and corruption during the restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Chen 2000; Hurst 2009; Lee 2002, 2007a, 2007b; Weston 2004).

Although precise figures on strikes and protests in China are unavailable, the overall trajectory of the country's industrial strife is obvious. Popular unrest of all types, including labor issues, land struggles, environmental disputes and so forth has risen steadily over the past two decades, from 9,000

separate “mass incidents” (the state's term for strikes, protests and riots) in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005, the last time the government released figures—to 127,000 in 2008, according to a leaked report (Tanner 2004; Wedeman 2009). One analysis puts the number of “mass incidents” occurring in 2010 at 180,000 (Bloomberg News 2011). How many of these incidents, though, are related to labor issues, remains an open question, given that the Chinese government does not publish strike statistics.

In the absence of official data, scholars and civil society groups have stepped in to estimate. Wedeman (2009) for example, investigates a sample of 947 “mass incidents” reported in domestic and foreign news articles from 1990 to 2008, to find that 345 incidents or 36.7% of the total number of incidents in his sample, involved workers and employment issues (farmers came in second with 229 incidents or 24.21% of the total). 345 strikes over a period of 18 years amounts to an average of 19 strikes per year. Chen (2009) analyzes a variety of news reports and counts 1097 mass incidents occurring between 1997 and 2007, of which 355 involved workers, although it is not clear to what extent all these strikes involved workplace disputes. Even assuming that they were related to work issues, the average number of strikes per year according to Chen’s count is 35.5. In a similar vein, China Labour Bulletin (2012) collects news reports of worker protests, and they count 553 incidents between 2000 and 2010, an average of 55.3 strikes per year. While these estimates show an increasing trend over time, they pale in comparison with another estimate by Chinese Academy of Sciences sociologist Yu Jianrong, who finds that that roughly 30,000 strikes and protests by workers occurred in 2009 alone (cited in China Labour Bulletin 2011a). Without more accurate data, we cannot reconcile these disparate estimates.

An alternative estimate of labor contention can be found in employment dispute data. Data from the country's arbitration panels and courts show an increasing number of formally settled labor cases, with the greatest spike coming in 2008, when such cases nearly doubled over the year before (from 350,182 to 693,495 separate cases), involving 1.2 million workers (Xinhua 2009; P.R.C. Department of Population and Employment Statistics 2009). Though this jump reflected the impact of the onset of the global financial crisis, labor dispute numbers did not decline the following year. In 2009, there were 875,000 disputes, though the number of workers involved (1.017 million) fell slightly (Xinhua 2010). Figures 1 and 2 show “mass incidents” through 2008, and labor disputes accepted for mediation, arbitration and court in the same period. Of course labor disputes are not strikes or protests, but this

data serves to show that labor contention in China is increasing. Silver and L. Zhang (2009) aptly call China “an emerging epicenter of world labor unrest;” Friedman and Lee (2010) concur.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

The legality of striking is unclear. The positive right to strike was removed from the Chinese Constitution in 1982. Feng (2011) argues persuasively that Article 27 of the 2001 Trade Union Law treats strikes as normal and that the ACFTU could use that article to take a more forceful stand on behalf of workers if it so wished. Despite this positive interpretation and similar clauses in Shenzhen's 2008 “harmonious labor relations” legislation, which tasked unions with representing workers in “negotiations” (rather than mere “consultations”, as in the Trade Union Law) in the event of a “work stoppage” or “slowdown” (China Labour Bulletin 2008b), China also has less permissive rules in place, which prohibit, for example, “gathering a crowd to disturb public order” (Articles 290-292 of the 1997 Criminal Law), which functions to discourage strikes and worker protests. The majority opinion amongst scholars (e.g., Brown 2010; Taylor, Chang, and Li 2003) is that Chinese law is ambiguous, neither explicitly banning nor viewing strikes as a legal option for workers. Labor activists, foreign and domestic, are divided over whether now is the best time to push for new, clarifying legislation on work stoppages, with some fearing that any rules passed in the current climate would serve to limit, not expand workers' options, for instance by requiring that all strikes receive the (unlikely) backing of the ACFTU (China Labor News Translations 2011).

The role of the ACFTU, the only trade union federation in China (which is subordinated to the Communist Party), in worker strikes and protests, is particularly relevant here. None of the incidents noted above were backed by the ACFTU. The union's roots lie in a dramatic era of labor militancy before the 1949 revolution, when it competed with Nationalist Party-backed “yellow unions” for the allegiance of workers (Barnett 1963: 76-82; Perry 1993). Immediately after the revolution, the Party and ACFTU leadership considered a relatively self-directed role for the federation under socialism, including allowing it to support strikes (Frazier 2002; Lescot 2004), but opted instead for a Soviet-style “transmission belt” role. The union was dissolved during the Cultural Revolution and was reestablished, along with Staff and Workers Representative Congresses on the Yugoslavian (and German) model, in the 1980s (Zhu and Chan 2005). Amid that decade's talk of separating the Party from day-to-day governance (*dang zheng fenkai*), a greater degree of independence again seemed to be

a real possibility for the ACFTU (China Labour Bulletin 2009). In the early 1990s, some scholars anticipated a powerful “corporatist” role for the union in the country's emerging market economy, whereby the ACFTU would forcefully represent workers against a corresponding employers' association under the umbrella of state control (Chan 1993; Unger and Chan 1995). Neither substantial independence nor a real corporatism have yet come to pass. In recent years, though, there have been intriguing signs of renewed reform in the ACFTU. The union has experimented with sector-wide agreements, such as an agreement covering the whole wool sector in Wenling, Zhejiang Province (Liu 2010) and another covering 450,000 catering workers across the whole of Wuhan, Hubei Province (China Labour Bulletin 2011c). In 2005, it launched a grassroots Wal-Mart retail workers organizing campaign that caught considerable attention abroad for its break from top-down, management-directed organizing, though the final contract achieved was a disappointment and democratic participation in the newly established Wal-Mart unions waned (Blecher 2008; Chan 2006; China Labor News Translations 2009b). The union participates actively in formulating new laws, such as the 2008 Labor Contract Law. At its best, however, the ACFTU typically occupies an awkward position, engaging in “quadripartite bargaining” (Chen 2010) or “fragmented bargaining” (Lüthje 2012), in which its interests are less than fully aligned with those of workers and in which the workers, not the union, take the lead in disputes. The union's organizing and representation exercises are heavily bureaucratic (Liu 2008). Its primary responsibility is to ensure stable labor relations for the Party. Though Article 27 of the 2001 Trade Union Law may treat strikes as normal and allow space for the union to play a more forceful role on behalf of workers in the event of a stoppage, the article also tellingly states, “The trade union shall assist the enterprise or institution in properly dealing with the matter so as to help restore the normal order of production and other work as soon as possible.” Thus, the ACFTU's subordination to the Party and State ensures that it is impossible for the union to initiate strikes and protests on behalf of its members.

Basis for Worker Strikes and Protests

Prior literature has focused considerably on the basis for labor discontent, expressed via protests and strikes. Behind China's rising labor unrest and the country's shifting labor laws and institutions lies a powerful qualitative shift in Chinese working class life that has been underway for three decades. A significant cause of labor unrest identified in the literature has been the declining fortunes of employees of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). A rich literature highlights the dramatic loss of status

experienced by a class that has gone in a single generation from being “master to mendicant,” in the words of Solinger (2004). It was “not uncommon” for young people in the Mao era to turn down university educations for jobs in SOEs offering extensive benefits and lifetime employment (Blecher 2002: 286). A sweeping economic “reform and opening,” including centrally-set (not necessarily market-driven) quotas for downsizing state firms (Hurst 2009), led to massive layoffs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, without matching social protections. Altogether, the number of workers employed by SOEs and urban collectives went from 143,131,500 in 1993 to 79,947,000 in 2002, an approximately 44% reduction; an additional 10 million jobs were cut between 2002 and 2005 (Hurst 2009: 16). Ngai, Chan and Chan (2010: 133) note the “paradox... that this state-driven process of economic globalization” was “accompanied by a state withdrawal process in the areas of social reproduction and social protection.” The same workers who once turned down college degrees, now near retirement, were laid off with minimal or no compensation and forced to sit by roadsides with pitiful cardboard signs listing their skills (Solinger 2004). Although some of these workers rejected the socialist values of their parents entirely, accepting the hegemony of market competition (Blecher 2002), the majority of older workers, continued to see the state as their source of livelihood, and their response to the mass layoff’s was to organize dramatic demonstrations (particularly in the Northeast) calling on the memory of Mao-era “model workers” like Iron Man Wang Jinxi against corrupt privatizations and their loss of livelihood (Weston 2004). Hurst and O’Brien (2002) highlight these state sector employees’ “moral economy” claims: demands that the state uphold an implicit patron-client bargain of matching worker sacrifice in the earlier socialist period with lifetime support. For example, workers Hurst and O’Brien interviewed who were also owed wages or unemployment benefits protested only about pensions, because pensions “are a symbolic recognition by the state and a firm of an employee’s years of devoted service” (350-351). Chen (2000) has described SOE workers as driven to the streets only by “subsistence crises” and gross corruption (again out of a sense of broken promises). Lee (2007a) sums up the protests of these SOE workers as “protests of desperation” calling for the preservation of a fading “socialist social contract.”

If protests of desperation were a key reason for strikes by former SOE workers, that has not generally been true of the workers who essentially replaced them, i.e. migrant workers from the countryside who moved in large groups to the cities to work in new, foreign-invested factories along the coast, producing cheap goods at low wages. As Ngai (2005) notes, migrants from the countryside,

in some sectors overwhelmingly women, have been broken in—physically and mentally—to the rhythms of capitalist production in new export processing zones on the coast (Ngai 2005), where work hours and wages fail to meet legal minimums and factory fires and other hazards were common (Chan 2001). These jobs have become increasingly flexible and informal, with workers employed at an arms length through labor dispatch companies. The sweatshop conditions of employment in coastal factories are the subject of an extensive literature (for reviews, see Friedman and Lee 2010; Gallagher, Lee and Kuruvilla 2011). Park and Cai (2011) estimate that informal employment constitutes roughly 40% of the urban labor force in China.

Apart from low wages and abject working conditions, these workers also do not have residence rights in the cities (*hukou*), implying the nearly complete absence of general rights of citizenship—to local schooling for their children, healthcare, etc. Migrant workers have, according to the literature, typically reacted through outbreaks of protests in the streets, such as the riots in Zengcheng, Guangdong over police harassment in 2011 or the constant protests by construction workers whose bosses escape without paying them their wages, while also engaging in weapons of the weak, such as non-cooperation and slowdowns at work (Zhang 2011). Lee (2007) characterizes the spontaneous outbursts of labor protests amongst these migrant workers without citizenship rights as “protests of discrimination.”

Irrespective of whether strikes and protests have been by SOE workers or migrant worker, the overwhelming focus of the actions has been defensive i.e., related to defending and/or upholding their basic rights, according to most analyses. China Labour Bulletin’s (2012) most recent research report, for example, notes that during the first half of the decade, almost all of the strikes and protests were with regard to wage arrears. Many of these were by migrant workers in manufacturing, construction and service industries who were denied prompt payment of wages and benefits. But many of these were also by SOE workers who were striking about wage arrears, social security contributions, as well as re-employment and the punishment of corrupt enterprise managers. While such defensive actions dominated in the latter part of the decade as well (over 70% of their count of 553 strikes and protests were “defensive” in nature between 2005 and 2010), there were a small and growing number of strikes that focused on seeking additional rights and benefits such as improvement in pay and working conditions, i.e. towards more offensive actions.

While the extant literature highlights the strikes by SOE workers and migrant workers, it is important to remember that they are correlated with regional variation. Lee (2007) argues that workers in the “rustbelt” (i.e., SOE workers) in the late 1990s and early 2000s engaged in protests of “desperation” while workers in the “sunbelt” (i.e. migrant workers) engaged in protests of “discrimination” (Lee 2007). Both Hurst (2009) and Blecher (2010) further divide these broad areas. According to Hurst, four regions are significant for SOE (“rustbelt”) workers: the Northeast, where local state capacity is weak (especially fiscally), market opportunities for workers are scarce, and class consciousness is strong; the Central Coast, where state capacity is strong, market opportunities are numerous, and worker views of the Maoist past are negative; North-Central China, where state capacity is relatively weak (but not as bad as the Northeast, given North-Central China's more recent decline), market opportunities are “scarce, but available,” and class identity is fairly strong; and, lastly, the Upper Changjiang, where state capacity is relative weak, market opportunities are relatively scarce, and workers have a fairly weak class consciousness. In Blecher's analysis, three regions are worth consideration: the Southeast, marked by a low state presence and a “globalized despotism” that drives workers, mostly young, into quiescence but also some resistance directed at factories; the Northeastern “decaying rustbelt,” marked, as in other analyses, by laid-off older workers who direct their occasionally cross-workplace factory resistance at “government offices and public spaces,” given the region’s higher state presence; and a “mixed, adaptive” region typified by cities like Tianjin, where the state sector has adapted itself to the global economy and there are many opportunities for workers outside the state, leading to relatively low resistance.

This regional variation is partially also explained by variation in state repression depending on the degree of organization exhibited by striking or protesting workers. Lee (2007a) argues, “Devising a 'carrot and stick' approach to divide and conquer leaders and ordinary workers, and differentiate laterally organized dissent from local cellular mobilizations, the government at both the local and the central levels present themselves as a Janus-faced authority, setting clear boundaries between zones of indifference, even tolerance, and forbidden terrains” (122). For example, when laid-off SOE workers in Liaoyang and Daqing organized massive cross-factory protests in 2002, they were ruthlessly repressed (Lee 2002, 2007a, 2007b; Pan 2009; Weston 2004). In contrast, when a wave of single-factory strikes swept Guangdong Province in 2010, “the authorities generally avoided the use of police to break up strikes. They instead adopted a neutral approach, actively mediating between labour and

management and promoting dialogue as a means of resolving disputes (China Labour Bulletin 2011: 34). As a result of this variation in government response, “few people are willing to take the lead to organize cross-factory action (Cai 2002). This line of argument would suggest that coordination in strikes is not likely. In the words of Friedman and Lee (2010), even when strike waves have swept the country, “the character of such protest is still fundamentally cellular in the sense that the 'cells' are not combining to form 'tissues'” (521).

Alongside the above variation related to enterprise ownership type, region, and state repression, labor unrest appears to vary according to different managerial regimes. For example, Lüthje (2012: 14-18) creates a typology of Chinese management regimes with varying forms of exploitation and worker resistance. The typology includes, first, a “state-bureaucratic” regime of skilled work, stability, unions and adherence to the law in SOEs; second, a “classical” regime in multinationals marked by skilled work, relatively high base pay, long-term career prospects, co-opted unions and labor stability broken by occasional worker lawsuits; third, a “corporate high performance” regime of flexible employment, a high proportion of bonus and performance pay, weak or nonexistent unions, and increasing collective worker protests in multinational and domestic private firms, particularly electronics manufacturers; fourth, a “flexibilized mass production” regime of low wages, long work hours, and no union; and, finally, a “low wage classic” regime of extremely low wages, piece work, disregard for legal minimums, no unions and “relatively frequent” collective and individual labor activism.¹

The literature on strikes and protests also shows how workers within the same Chinese factories have been divided internally, too. In the Mao and early followed by SOE workers and reform era, in addition to divisions between the employees of state and collective enterprises (Bian 1994), workers were divided by their different patron-client relations with enterprise-level Party leaders (Walder 1988)

¹The literature shows how the tactics followed by SOE workers and new migrant workers differ, as well, as already hinted at in the previous discussion. If the old SOE generation focused on “moral economy” claims and mass demonstrations, the younger generation of migrants has, of late, been portrayed as becoming more legally minded (in contrast to their earlier more spontaneous acts of resistance). In the great mobilizations of the early 2000s, state workers marched with portraits of Chairman Mao and stereos blasting the Internationale (Pan 2009; Weston 2004); migrant workers, by contrast, today patiently shepherd lawsuits through mediation, arbitration and court, returning to legal channels even when disillusioned (Gallagher 2006). The litigiousness of migrants is a source of scholarly disagreement, with some arguing that the government's “rule by law” project has led worker activism astray (Friedman and Lee 2010; Lee and Shen 2011; Ngai, C. K. C. Chan, and J. Chan 2010). For example, Friedman and Lee (2010: 530) write, “Marketization has generated a huge increase in worker insurgency... the response of the state has been to legislate conflict out of existence, the result of which has been the individualization of what are necessarily collective problems.” In this vein, Lee and Shen (2011) criticize migrant NGOs' overemphasis on narrow, personal rights at the expense of claims rooted in class solidarity. Chan (2006), however, praises the same NGOs' legal activism as empowering; Halegua (2008) highlights their pragmatism in mediating in the “shadow of the law.” Su and He (2010), on the other hand, do not see a neat division between legal and extra-legal activism, instead highlighting how one tactic will sometimes feed into the other and how both often occur simultaneously.

and by the different privileges enjoyed by “permanent” and “temporary” workers (Perry 2002). Under reform, recruitment networks based on hometown ties (and, ultimately, rural gender relations) cut employees off from each other on shop floors and in dormitories (Lee 1998), as did social connections (*guanxi*) with benefactors in the broader labor market (Sargeson 1999). Zhang (2008: 24, 40-41) discusses how auto plants in China today adopt either “lean-and-mean” factory regimes, characterized by a “high wage, high turnover strategy,” or “lean-and-dual” regimes, where a core of formal workers are subjected to “hegemonic” management but work alongside temporary, contract workers who are subjected to “despotic” management; the two groups, formal and contract workers, hold critical views of one another, undermining “the structural foundations of solidarity” on the shop floor. The challenges presented by these sorts of divisions were evident during the Honda strike of 2010, when strikers, who included student interns, temporary “contract” workers, and permanent employees, could agree on no less than 30 representatives for negotiations (Meng 2010), though, of course, the Honda strike was an overall success.

Finally the prior literature highlights sectoral variations. The analysis of the 553 strikes and protests by China Labour Bulletin (2012) shows that over 70% of the strikes are in the manufacturing sector, with construction and mining responsible for a smaller percentage of the total. A significant number of strikes recorded by CLB were carried out by regular teachers who were seeking pay parity with civil servant salaries. In addition, community teachers, millions of whom were laid off during the early part of this decade were also frequent protesters. As is expected, CLB’s analysis also shows that in the early 2000s, a majority of strikes and protests occurred in SOE firms, (80%) but by the end of the decade the strikes in private firms had increased and accounted for 80% of all strikes and protests.

In sum, the prior literature reports widely differing estimates on the quantum of labor strikes, but exhibits more consensus that there is considerable variation in protest based on the nature of the workers (whether migrant or SOE), regional differences, industry differences accentuated by both state repression and management styles and ownership differences (whether SOE or private). The literature highlights the difference in tactics of SOE and migrant workers and suggests that cross industry strikes are not likely. Most importantly, the prior literature paints a picture of strikes as defensive reactions by workers trying to protect existing rights and benefits. We will argue in the next section that during the last three years, much has changed from the picture depicted in this literature.

THEORY AND ARGUMENT

We argue in this paper that there is a clearly identifiable shift underway in labor protest in China in two main regards. On the one hand, we will show that there is a quantitative shift in terms of an increasing number of strikes, (alongside other forms of protest). On the other hand, we argue that workers are striking proactively, (not defensively) for a variety of instrumental reasons, consistent with an increasing “bread and butter” focus. We suggest that although the regional differences identified in prior literature are important, they are waning, since we find strikes to be distributed across the country. We also argue that the sharp distinction sometimes drawn between legal and extra-legal responses to exploitation seems less and less salient, and there are signs (albeit limited) that workers' reluctance to engage in cross-factory mobilizations is breaking down. Instances like the 2010 Honda strike wave show both the power of intra-workplace divisions and workers' ability to overcome them. Thus, from both a quantitative and qualitative standpoint, we argue that Chinese workers are acting more aggressively, are more instrumental in their demands, and show more organization in their strikes and a greater willingness to strike over small changes in employment conditions.

What might explain this new assertiveness on the part of Chinese workers? Clearly there is no “organized labor movement,” given the ACFTU’s orientation, and there also is no organized “social movement” as described by Tilly and Tarrow (2007).² Our challenge therefore is to explain the increased industrial unrest in China, the shift from ‘defensive’ strikes about treatment by state and employers to “offensive actions about wages and benefits”, without the unifying force of a trade union or a social movement behind them. We use here McAdam’s (1999) “political process” model, based on the experience of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. According to McAdam's model, structural (economic) developments (the decline of Big Cotton and northward migration of African Americans in McAdam's example) and political openings (themselves the result of economic changes) lead to a new sense of possibility and therefore a new assertiveness on the part of an oppressed group via a process of

² Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 111) describe a social movement as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.” Labor activism in China certainly features performances, including “modular” ones like strikes; organizations, such as labor NGOs; networks, such as loose “native place associations” of people from the same hometown; and traditions, such as appeals to a fading “socialist social contract” (Lee 2007). But it does not yet meet Tilly and Tarrow's core condition of constituting a “sustained campaign of claim making” for two reasons. First, strikes and protests by Chinese workers are not “sustained.” They typically last only hours or days. Second, they do not join together to form a “campaign.” Instead, like British contentious politics in the early eighteenth century, before the onset of full-fledged movements (Tilly 2006: 51-52), labor activism in China tends to be “parochial” (locally oriented) and “bifurcated” (characterized by direct action against immediate institutions and mediated approaches to distant authorities).

“continuous” change. McAdam notes “the altered responses” of elites “to a particular challenger serve to transform evolving political conditions into a set of 'cognitive' cues signifying to insurgents the political system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenge;” in the case of the Civil Rights Movement, these new responses came in the form of new court decisions and northern politicians' courting of the black vote (49). The simultaneous growth of “indigenous organizations” (black churches and NAACP chapters in McAdam's example) provides a forum for reinforcing those cues, leading to “cognitive liberation” and the birth of a full-fledged social movement. Strategic decisions, especially alliances with other groups, thereafter determine the longevity of the “insurgency.”

For McAdam's framework to be applicable to the Chinese labor context, we would expect certain factors to be present. See Figure 3 for our adaptation of McAdam's model. First economic and political factors that influence workers bargaining power should exist. We discuss two of these economic and political conditions below, treating them as equal potential contributors to labor unrest (rather than prioritizing the economic over the political, as in McAdam's original schema).

Insert Figure 3 about here

The key economic condition is that since early 2009, China has developed a surprising labor shortage on its coasts and, increasingly, elsewhere (see, for example, Rapoza 2011). Labor shortages are now evident in several parts of China, notably the Pearl River Delta, the Yangtze River Delta around Shanghai and even in places in central China. Gallagher (2011) links the increase in labor militancy and bargaining power to the shortage of workers, arguing that these shortages are a function of three issues: the decline in the working population as a consequence of the one child policy³, policy changes in agriculture (sharp cuts to the taxes paid by farmers and stimulus-driven increases in rural infrastructure) that are raising the “opportunity costs” of working on the coast and reducing migration to the cities, thus depriving them of workers, and finally, institutional discrimination against migrants as a result of the *hukou* system, which remains a barrier to the permanent migration and urbanization of many rural citizens.

³ The one-child policy may be impacting worker militancy in another way, as well. Like others, Gallagher (2010) notes of the younger generation of workers, “As single children or from very small families, they have been treated well by their parents.”

Clearly, rural workers are increasingly staying at home. A poll of 200,000 migrant workers in 2011 found that more chose to work in their home provinces than chose to go elsewhere (Wang 2012).⁴ Capital is moving away from southeastern export processing zones like the Pearl River Delta. Inland cities have become the new boom towns. Chongqing, a megalopolis located above the Three Gorges Dam, “for the first time employed more of its surplus rural workforce locally than it sent to other areas” in 2011 (The Economist 2012). However, there are reports that the shortage is deepening inland and in the northeast, too (Chung 2011). This is a dramatically different situation from the one that prevailed before and immediately after the global financial crisis. Whether the labor shortage is temporary or permanent is still debated. Fang Cai suggests that China may be at the Lewisian turning point, when labor scarcity begins to shift the economy away from labor intensive, input-driven growth to enhanced productivity, declining inequality, and greater domestic consumption. On the other hand Chan (2010) argues that the country has not yet reached such and point but is instead experiencing a series of shorter-term mismatches of ages, skills and demand. Whether permanent or temporary, the shortage has served to increase labor militancy and bargaining power, reflected particularly in increasing demands for wages.

In the political sphere, the state’s policies regarding worker protection and collective bargaining as well as a new media openness serve to further increase the bargaining power and rights awareness of workers. Perhaps in an endogenous response to previous worker unrest and perhaps in an independent bid to move up the value-added chain, beginning in the months before the crisis, the government enacted a range of pro-labor pieces of legislation, including the “Labor Contract Law,” “Employment Promotion Law,” and the “Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law,” as well as daring municipal collective bargaining measures like the “Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Harmonious Labor Relations Regulations,” which came close to recognizing a right to strike. These reforms essentially introduced stronger protections for workers (Friedman and Lee 2010; McDermott 2010). More recently, Guangdong authorities considered passing “Regulations on the Democratic Management of Enterprises,” which would have mandated collective bargaining under certain conditions (and therefore drew a sharply negative, possibly decisive, response from Hong Kong-based plant owners, see Garver 2010), and new national “Regulations on Consultation and Mediation for Labor Disputes in

⁴ The “the proportion of rural workers older than 40 has gone from 30 percent in 2008 to 38.3 percent in 2011. In those three years, the average age of rural workers went from 34 to 36. That indicates there may indeed be a limit to what has previously been called an ‘unlimited supply’ of migrant workers” (Ibid).

Enterprises” went into effect in January 2012. These laws, taken together, amount to an official acknowledgment of the massive scale of worker unrest, as well as a new interest in containing conflict through providing it with legitimate channels, not attempting to eliminate it entirely. China's “political opportunity structure” for workers (Tarrow 1998) has clearly shifted since the global financial crisis in late 2008.

Second, consistent with Macadam’s framework, workers should experience “cognitive cues” that their leverage and opportunities are changing. What forms might these “cues” take? Companies' efforts to “reverse-market” themselves as “preferred employers,” by actively recruiting in working class neighborhoods (rather than waiting for workers to line up at factory doors, desperate for work), by building better dormitories, by publishing factory magazines, and by forming “task forces” of employee representatives (Interviews 10, 28-30), may be received by working people as powerful “cues” that the balance of power has shifted and that they (workers) hold greater leverage over capital than a decade ago.

Rising earnings may send similar signals. Wage hikes in recent years have been dramatic. Between 1996 and 2000, average monthly wages only grew from 500 RMB to approximately 800 RMB, but between 2000 and 2007 they more than doubled to well over 2,000 RMB (China Labour Bulletin 2008a). Migrants’ average monthly salaries increased by 21.2% in 2011 over the year before; the government has decreed that “the average growth of China's minimum wages should be at least 13 percent” through 2015 and should constitute “40 percent of average local salaries” by that year (The China Post 2012). Strikes at a series of strikes at auto parts suppliers and a rash of suicides (and, subsequently, investigative reports) have led to high wage increases exceeding 20% at Honda plants and the electronics giant Foxconn (Hon Hai Precision Industries). Though Chinese workers have struggled with rising inflation, changes of this order cannot go unnoticed.

Equally importantly, media coverage of new labor laws like those noted above and greater reporting on strikes may provide “cues” that more activism is tolerated by authorities, that the “political opportunity structure” in one of its most basic aspects, repression, is opening (Tarrow 1998). The 2008 Labor Contract Law was preceded by an unprecedented public debate that even drew in foreign chambers of commerce and unions (Gallagher and Dong 2011). Along with other laws, after its enactment, the Labor Contract Law was the subject of widespread domestic media reports focusing on

individual cases of workers who successfully used the law “as a weapon.” Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) note that by telling “gritty” stories of mistreatment and eventual redemption via arbitration and court, Chinese state newspapers both attract readers (serving the needs of an increasingly commercialized press) and, according to surveys conducted by Stockmann and Gallagher, increase trust in the efficacy of legal activism. As a result of both the pre-implementation debate and post-implementation news coverage of the Labor Contract Law, when it went into effect on January 1, 2008, attendance at legal trainings held by labor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Pearl River Delta spiked.³ As noted previously, labor disputes brought formally to mediation, arbitration and court also doubled (although this was also likely a result of the onset of the global financial crisis).

Importantly, though, besides encouraging coverage of new labor laws and successful legal cases, the state has also allowed more open discussion of industrial strife. The year 2008 marked the rollout of what has been dubbed China’s “Control 2.0” approach to media and public opinion: Communist Party Secretary Hu Jintao called for “releasing authoritative information at the earliest moment, raising timeliness, increasing transparency, and firmly grasping the initiative in news propaganda work” (Bandurski 2008). However, strikes and other worker “mass incidents” have since received increased coverage, albeit with a Party-approved slant. This has meant that workers hear more about other workers’ activism than ever before. Several interviewees for this paper noted the effect of coverage of the Honda strike on workers’ sense of possibility. One activist, for example, said, “*The Honda strike, in particular, gave workers a new momentum. It awakened them*” (Interview 20). According to another, “*The Honda strike had a big impact on workers’ opinions, because of the media attention given to the strike. Similar strikes occurred in the past, but without the same attention*” (Interview 21). According to McAdam, as such cues accumulate, workers experience “cognitive liberation,” viewing their possibilities in a new light.

Finally, per McAdam, workers should experience “cognitive liberation” and this should be fostered by “indigenous organizations.” Most of our paper will be devoted to this “liberation” (albeit without McAdam’s attention to “indigenous institutions”), which should essentially be reflected in new attitudes. We would expect, therefore, increased demands for wages and benefits, for greater attention to the details of work life, and for protection from employer arbitrary action. These new attitudes are

³ One of the authors was then responsible for the China programming of a foreign labor rights advocacy group and was able to observe the excitement generated by the law on the ground.

not only a function of cognitive cues, but also changing demographics. China's younger migrant workers are different from their parent's generation. As Kuruvilla, Gallagher and Lee (2011) note "They are more demanding, more rights conscious, and more attuned to the inequality of treatment and opportunity they face as second class citizens. They tend to be better educated, with greater exposure to mass media, technology and more acclimated to city life. Their expectations for the future are different from the previous generation and they are not likely to return to the farms. These workers, are more likely to mobilize and engage in wildcat strikes and protests, emboldened by the knowledge that jobs are not scarce."

To summarize, following McAdam, we argue that economic and political changes, specifically a growing coastal labor shortage that is spreading inland and new labor laws and policies, have given Chinese workers new leverage and new openings for activism. These changes have been conveyed to workers via a series of "cognitive cues" that they can act to make changes. Employers reverse-marketing themselves to potential employees and rising wages have shown to workers their new economic power. Wide public discussion of labor laws and positive news stories on labor litigation, as well as new policies on reporting "mass incidents" in a prompt manner, have sent "cognitive cues" to workers that they enjoy greater political space to challenge employers (though not, perhaps, the state). We would therefore expect "cognitive liberation" to take place: workers should demand higher wages, more attention to the details of working life and greater respect. Below, we will detail the data and methods we will use to document this liberation.

DATA AND METHODS

We use three sources of data in this paper. First, given the absence of any official statistics on strikes in China, we develop our own data. The first author maintains a unique website *China Strikes* (<http://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com>), which documents strikes and protests by Chinese workers in a format that is accessible to the general public. The site relies mainly on domestic news reports, but also dissident websites (such as *Boxun*), blog posts, micro-blogs, and direct reports submitted via the site from people on the ground, as well as from established sources like China Labour Bulletin. Based on these reports, the first author has carefully winnowed the material to extract only those cases where it was clear that workers had engaged in collective action (not various individual actions common in China like holding a sign with lists of personal grievances or threatening as an individual to commit

suicide, etc.), and where the grievances were clearly related to workers' employment, as opposed to, say, police harassment (unless interactions with police were a part of a workers' regular workday, as in the case of taxi drivers). Our definition of strikes includes both “strikes” and “protests” are included, as Chinese workers often resort to dramatic street actions—marching, blocking roads, holding banners outside government agencies—instead of or in addition to halting production, in hopes that the state will intervene (Su and He 2010). This process has yielded a total of 435 strikes between January 1, 2008 to March 31, 2012 (as of May 11, 2012—the process of collation is ongoing). This data almost certainly under-estimates the total number of collective actions by workers, as there are many labor incidents in the country that may not be reported by the media (recall that the state’s openness toward the media is a recent and evolving position and there is considerable variation in media “freedom” across provinces and regions).⁴ Also, our data does not comport with other counts of protests and “mass incidents” more generally, including government reports, which yield figures in the tens of thousands. Our data could also be skewed toward coastal areas where the media has greater access and where citizens are more connected to the internet, as well as toward greater reporting on those strikes that disrupt life outside the factory gates, such as bus and taxi work stoppages, which are more likely to compel domestic media coverage. There is no obvious reason, however, why changes in worker demands as recorded by the site should be systematically biased.

Given that China lacks a clear set of newspapers that can serve as reliable barometers of unrest, data gathering is therefore necessarily ad hoc and the various estimates differ, since researchers use different sources. Chen (2009), who finds 355 strikes between 1997-2007, “mainly relies on the news archive of the Central News Agency in Taiwan, and the Internet news sources from China Labour Bulletin, the Epoch Times, Xinhua, BBC, Radio Free Asia, and VOA” (104). China Labour Bulletin’s strike map and its regular research reports draw on some of the same sources used earlier by Chen (2009), as well as local Chinese newspapers' websites, new dissident blogs (like Jasmine Places), and information from the organization's call-in radio show. Our sources differ in that our data includes, additionally, a few individual tip-offs about incidents, as well as a greater array of English-language materials, including both mainstream news sources and blogs and political sites. When we compared our data with that of China Labour Bulletin, we found that several strikes listed in their data set did not show up in ours, and vice versa. Thus, for the 2011-2012 period, we combined CLB data with ours

⁴ For example, a strike wave that allegedly included dozens of enterprises in Dalian in 2010 only shows up as one incident in *China Strikes*, because information on only one of the actions could be located online.

(note that our count starts from 2008)⁵. In general, we found that the our data collected prior to these additions tracked CLB's trends in terms of rises and falls in incidents, in terms of sectoral spread, and in terms of the causes of strikes. Our data is also broadly in line with the prior estimates by Weideman and Chen noted here and in our literature review, although our numbers are higher, which is to be expected, since we cover a more contemporary period. In sum, the data used in this paper, though by no means a complete record of labor unrest, is thus likely the highest publicly available count of strikes and protests nationwide by workers during the period 2009-2012.

Our second source of data is two case studies of strikes in plants operated by a multinational aeronautics firm. The firm in question has roughly 17,000 employees in China. The two case studies are of plants located in Chengdu and Zhuzhou, where the company employs 405 people and 320 people respectively. These employees are highly skilled workers, engaged in advanced manufacturing. As such, their approaches to labor-management relations provide a unique window on Chinese workers' changing attitudes and tactics, since they are likely to be emulated by less skilled workers. Here we rely on internal corporate reports about the strike, and interviews with the company's global industrial managers in February and March 2012.

Our final source of data is a series of interviews conducted with a variety of stakeholders in Chinese labor relations between June and July 2011, including managers, labor activists, laid-off SOE employees, and factory auditors. Managers are the first group to be impacted by any change in workers' attitudes; labor activists interact daily with workers and hear their most serious concerns; laid-off SOE employees can make clear contrasts between their own conditions and activism and those of today's young people; and factory auditors, in this case “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) auditors hired by major brands, have extensive experience with different workplaces and worker willingness to share problems with outsiders. These interviews can all be classified as “outside looking in” views of Chinese workers' changing attitudes—not the views one might obtain through interviewing young workers themselves. However, as such, they provide a strong measure of change in labor's position over a long period of time; such a measure might not be obtained through interviews with people who

⁵ In the rare instances when we did not add CLB-recorded incidents, this was because they were not clearly collective strikes and protests and instead either concerned only cases of individual grievances or contained only information on the use of formal legal channels. However, the inclusion of the CLB data led to a sharp rise in the overall incidents captured by *China Strikes* from 2011 onwards, meaning that CLB captured many incidents missed by *China Strikes* and that the resulting ratio of *China Strikes* data from 2008 to 2011 versus post-2011 may therefore be somewhat skewed toward later dates, when the power of two groups of data collectors was combined

are themselves the agents of change. Interviewees were contacted via “snowball sampling” and the conversations took a “semi-structured” form, meaning that core questions of interest to us were covered, but in an order and manner determined by the flow of the discussion (Bernard 2006; R. M. Fretz, R. I. Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Notes from the interviews were openly and axially coded (Strauss and Corbin 1990) by authors, as well as a group of students in a course on qualitative research methods. Throughout the paper, we attempt to triangulate (Jick 1979) between these sources, where possible, realizing that measuring the exact same data by qualitative and quantitative means is often difficult (Ahmed and Sil 2009). We accompany our interviews and *China Strikes* information with data from the news and secondary sources.

RESULTS

Strikes and Their Distribution

We first examine the number and distribution of strikes by workers in China. As noted, our database identifies 435 industrial actions between January 2008 and March 31 2012. Table 1 provides the distribution of strikes in our data on an annual basis. Averaging this data by month we find an average of 3.42 actions per month in 2008, 2 per month in 2009, 6.17 per month in 2010, 18.33 per month in 2011 and 25.33 per month in the first three months of 2012, and except for spurts in fall of 2008 and the summer of 2010, the trend is increasing steadily, during the last four years.

Insert Table 1 about here

Taking a more longitudinal view, we compare the number of strikes and protests we have recorded with those of other studies that use a similar methodology for counting incidents. Our results show clearly that there has been a major increase in strikes and protests by workers in China over the different time periods that have been studied. Table 2 compares yearly average strike and protest data from the different studies, showing a major increase from 19.16 incidents during the 1990-2008 period to 131.81 during the 2008 -2012 (March) period.

Insert Table 2 about here

We want to acknowledge again that limitation of our data. We do not know for certain how our count of strikes and protests relates to the actual number of such incidents, since they are based on a variety of sources (including media reports) and we know that the media reporting on strikes and protests have been increasing. However, we expect that these media reports and actual incidents are roughly correlated, as labor disputes formally accepted for mediation, arbitration and court (and recorded in the China Labour Statistical Yearbooks) have similarly increased.

Apart from a general increase in strikes, we find that strikes and protests by workers appear to occur throughout China. Figure 4 details the geographic distribution of incidents. Although the largest number of strikes and protests have taken place in Guangdong's Pearl River Delta (accounting for 36% of all incidents), the others are distributed widely across the country. Clearly, the regional variation in protests noted in the prior literature (especially the binary distinction between northeast and southeast, with the northeast more ready for collective action) appear to be diminishing. Figures 5-7 examine strikes in different industries, and here too, they appear dispersed around the country.⁶

Insert Figures 4-7 here.

However, other patterns are intriguing. For example, despite the prevalence of auto manufacturers in China's northeast and Yangtze River Delta, strikes and protests involving auto workers over the past four years have been concentrated in the Pearl River Delta, where at least 10 such incidents have occurred, versus 11 spread out over the rest of the country (Figure 7). The vast majority of auto strikes, moreover, occurred in a relatively short period, during the summer 2010, while taxi strikes rose sharply in late 2008, sparked perhaps by the success of Chongqing drivers in landing a negotiation with the city's party secretary on live television, and peaked again in the fall of 2011, owing to rising fuel prices. Domestic private enterprises were particularly negatively affected by the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008 and therefore experienced high degrees of unrest.

⁶ when we look at strikes in several different industries such as steel, chemical and fertilizers, and auto and auto parts workers, with some occurring more inland and some more on the coast. Some of these differences are predictable. Strikes in steel, chemical and fertilizer plants are, unsurprisingly, concentrated inland, where the state sector and agriculture are stronger (see Figure 5 for steel and Figure 6 for chemical and fertilizer strikes).

Foreign-invested enterprises account for at least 136 of the 435 or 31.26% of all the strikes and protests in *China Strikes* (ownership information is not known for all enterprises, so this figure may be slightly higher in actuality; Taiwanese- and Hong Kong-invested enterprises are considered “foreign” for the purposes of our analysis, as they are treated differently than domestic enterprises by the Chinese government).

Causes of Strikes

With regard to the causes of strikes and protests, the prior literature had highlighted how collective actions were more “defensive” i.e seeking to “uphold and defend existing rights and benefits” (CLB 2012), although the report acknowledged that they were seeing the beginnings of strikes for improvement in pay and working conditions towards the end of the decade. Our data suggest an explosion in these types of strikes in 2010 and 2011, and continuing in 2012. 102 out of 435 strikes and protests were for increased wages while 44 were in reaction to work speedups. This change in orientation to offensive rather than defensive actions is even more sharply clear when we examine our interview data from a sample of Chinese employment relations stakeholders, which we discuss below.

Our coding of the data reveal three broad categories of strike and protest causes, signaling a clear bread and butter orientation. The predominant reasons for collective action include more money, better working conditions, and more respect in treatment, i.e. traditional concerns of workers and trade unions in the rest of the world. The centrality of demands for more money came out most clearly in our interviews. Today's employees are less easily satisfied monetarily than previous generations. This is understood as money-grubbing by older workers and factory managers. A group of laid-off SOE workers in Guizhou, reflected on the difference between themselves and their children, had the following to say: “*Everyone is focused on earning money now. In the past, you got a bit of social support and you felt you were doing something for your country. You would even do some stuff as a volunteer.... Now, if you're not paid, you don't do anything*” (Interviews 12-18). Echoing this assessment but from a different perspective, a foreign apparel factory manager noted, “*workers want 1,500 RMB for just their training period, when they aren't doing anything for the company. In the past, they didn't make any demands at all. They were happy to have air conditioning*” (Interview 10). Fully 102 out of our 435 strikes and protests reflected demands for higher earnings from January 2008 to the

end of March 2012, with most occurring in the past two years. And not all these actions for wage increases were in the automobile sector either.⁷

Workers do not just want more money, though. The number of strikes and protests due to work hours (overtime) and speed-ups have also been increasing, from five in 2008, none in 2009, nine in 2010, 25 in 2011, and six in the first three months of 2012, according to our data.⁸ A corporate social responsibility (CSR) auditor and his assistants noted that workers' complaints are now more "pointed" (*jian rui*): "Now, they will bring up 'overtime' and other, more specific issues. They now dispute speed-ups without corresponding pay" (Interviews 28-30). In the words of an official from the Hubei Federation of Trade Unions (HFTU), "They [workers] care about new things, like time to rest. If they've earned enough, they want time for themselves" (Interview 26). Besides overtime and rest, a number of other details of work conditions appear to cause worker dissatisfaction. The same factory owner quoted above also lamented to the authors, "Workers get angry about missing documents. Everything has to be in writing now. 'Don't say it, write it'" (Interview 10).

Finally, workers are more likely than in the past to demand something more intangible: respect. The apparel factory boss interviewed for this paper said that workers are "definitely more easily offended now" and that, in order to retain employees, he "has to make people proud of their jobs, make them feel like they are highly qualified seamstresses" (Interview 10). According to an activist in the Pearl River Delta who has helped workers file legal cases, "It is now no longer just about money or about winning the case.... They will fight for their 'face' and status" (Interview 21). The HFTU official quoted above agreed: "They don't just want a job... but also want respect" (Interview 26). A Wuhan-based activist who had previously worked in Guangdong made a regional distinction, though: "In the south, people will say they're suing their company for 'face' or for 'respect' or because they want 'their labor respected' or 'workers respected,'" whereas in places like Wuhan, the focus is more on "small, purely money demands" (Interview 25).

⁷ To determine whether the rise in "proactive" wage demands versus other demands has been statistically significant, we regressed the number of strikes that were for higher wages (coded 1 for higher wage demands and 0 for other issues) on time (in months), controlling for auto strikes. We find a significant relationship here, strikes and protests for higher wages had increased over time as a portion of all strikes and protests in the sample, with an increase of one month increasing the odds of a strike including "offensive" wage demands by a factor of 0.51 (the natural log transformation of the odds ratio shown in the table). Nonetheless, the AUTO SECTOR was extremely coordinated with calls for HIGHER WAGES, having an odds ratio of 7.48, at a 1 percent level of significance.

⁸ Increased activism over work hours may also be a result of the labor shortage on the coast. Activists in the Pearl River Delta note that with fewer workers available, factories are forcing those remaining to put in longer workdays.

There is increased coordination of strikes and protests, and they are more strategic and better organized by workers themselves. The first incident in the 2010 strike wave at Honda auto parts plants was perfectly placed in the company's supply chain, shutting down the firm's operations nationwide, and it involved extended negotiations led, on the workers' side, by worker-elected representatives and by legal academics who had been invited for support. Workers at over twenty other auto plants, including the plant described at the outset of this article, followed suit (IHLO 2010). The academics involved were impressed by the workers' "complicated process of choosing goals" and "strong collective consciousness" (Interviews 6-8; Meng 2010). More recently, employees at Pepsi bottling plants in at least five widely separated cities (Changsha, Fuzhou, Chongqing, Nanchang, and Chengdu) held a coordinated leave-taking protest on the same day (China Labour Bulletin 2011b). If the auto strike wave spread by demonstration effects and emulation, i.e. what Tarrow (2005) calls "non-relational diffusion," then the Pepsi wave seems to have been guided by neither "relational diffusion" (where the participants know each other or are part of the same networks) nor entirely "non-relational diffusion," but rather simply, well-organized online outreach.

In contrast to prior analyses that emphasize a trade-off between legal and extra-legal activism, workers seem to be pursuing an "all of the above" approach. In Xianning, Hubei Province, for example, taxi drivers faced a government order to relinquish their business licenses and join cab monopolies in late 2010, the drivers went on strike for 41 days, sent petitioning delegations to Beijing, sang songs outside government buildings, *and* launched lawsuits (H. Xie 2011; Zhang 2011). Nor does the distinction between "individual" and "collective" activism seem as significant as once believed. A more apt description of the current direction of Chinese worker mobilization is "individualism via collective means."⁸ Today's workers are becoming more and more unrecognizable to their forebears because of their new individualism, as expressed in their hyper mobility and alleged money-mindedness. Yet, they are also organizing actions like the recent Pepsi strike that require more coordination than anything attempted since the cross-factory protests in the northeastern rustbelt in the early 2000s—and that earlier activism was confined to single cities, such as Daqing and Liaoyang.

It is important that the increase in strikes are part of a general increase in worker militancy, and wider variation in worker tactics voice their displeasure and to obtain instrumental gains. At the most basic level, workers are exercising their "exit" (as opposed to "voice") options (Freeman and Medoff

⁸ We are indebted to Bradley Weinberg for this phrase.

1984) and “voting with their feet,” by leaving employers that offer sub-par wages or who are abusive. The factory boss quoted above estimated his plant's turnover at 20%, up from next to zero “*back in the day,*” and said that 20% was low compared to his competitors, which he said were experiencing 60-70% turnover (Interview 10). SOE workers interviewed for this paper said, “*People don't learn skills, they switch jobs constantly*” (Interviews 12-18). Such comments are echoed by a survey of 108 foreign-invested manufacturers in China by The American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai and Booz & Company (2009: 19), which found that 60 respondents had “difficulty in finding and retaining reliable personnel.” A full 34% of the businessmen interviewed, moreover, rated “poor employee retention” one of their “top three” issues in 2007; this figure only dropped to 19% in 2008-2009, during the height of the financial crisis lay-offs (23).

Workers are also engaging in what Scott (1985) calls “everyday acts of resistance” using “weapons of the weak.” The simplest such weapon workers have is holding back and “shirking.” Our factory boss said, “*It's not so much that there are different demands by workers. The behavior of today's workers is different. Not steaming ahead, not as hard working*” (Interview 10). The boss added that new incentives, including negative ones like the threat of revoking housing and food subsidies, were now required to force employees to meet his factory's standards (Interview 10). He also complained of increased “aggression” from workers, of a greater potential for violence over small disagreements; to protect *against this, his factory has had to install 280 surveillance cameras. An activist similarly worried that “if no one steps in to represent workers, things will develop in an increasingly violent direction*” (Interview 23).

In addition, workers are also taking increased advantage of emergent institutions outside the state and Party-backed “mass organizations.” For example, workers were described by interviewees as more active in reaching out to NGOs and inspectors than in the past. One activist said workers used to be suspicious of his organization when he would contact them in hospitals or elsewhere. Now, he said, “*they actually call and request materials*” (Interview 20). The CSR auditor and his assistants quoted above noted: “*Five years ago, when we conducted CSR audits, most workers said what their bosses wanted them to say.... When we investigate factories now, workers say what they want to, tell the truth, explain their factories' actual conditions, say things they wouldn't say in the past*” (Interviews 28-30). In some instances, employees have contacted trade union officials. This sort of behavior is not, in itself, particularly empowering. But it shows a new daring and savvy on the part of workers.

In sum, workers appear to be experiencing “cognitive liberation,” as evidenced by their demands for higher wages; for attention to the details of work life, including more reasonable work hours; and their call for greater respect. This new consciousness is being expressed via a variety of tactics. Workers' strikes and protests are increasing, as are the sophistication of these collective actions. Two case studies below reveal these developments in greater detail.

Evidence from Case Studies

In general, the focus on bread and butter issues that comes through fairly clearly in our interview data is also evident in the results of our two mini-case studies about plants in the aerospace industry. The Chengdu plant is a joint venture with a state-owned engine company and the first majority-owned foreign aerospace manufacturing facility in China. It makes components for commercial engines. The Zhuzhou plant is a joint venture in which a Chinese, state-owned partner owns 15%. It manufactures integrally bladed rotors (IBRs), shafts and cases for engines, which “*are not simple parts; IBRs are about as tough as it gets... complex machines... and tough material machine, also*” (Interview X4). In the words of one of the company's international industrial relations managers, the workers do not “*do the sort of work where you can necessarily bring in, you know, hundreds of folks from the farms and just sort of put them on an assembly line and they go make things; it is very highly skilled aerospace machining, which... you know requires a certain skill set*” (Interview X3). Training typically lasts three months. The average age of the employees is about thirty, with a core of older workers in each plant. Earnings are relatively high and turnover is low (less than 2% per year). Workers are not housed on site, but rather live in the surrounding communities, where they have *hukou* or local household registration (i.e. enjoy full city benefits). Clearly, these plants are composed of highly skilled industrial workers, corresponding to “blue collar labor aristocracy”. Their actions could thus be very important in that they will be emulated by all workers. The cases are discussed below.

Chengdu Plant: This was a former state owned aircraft parts manufacturing factory. Several of the employees worked in the SOE before it entered into a joint venture with a multinational firm. At that time, these workers were given a one-time severance payment for their previous service in the SOE, and they joined the new entity (the IR manager reported that this was an unusual decision). The general manager (GM) at the time of the incidents in question was a local woman who had worked herself up from the shop floor—taking quality manager and line manager jobs before becoming assistant GM and

then GM. In keeping with the partnership, the deputy GM belonged the Chinese partner company. While there were a few “senior individuals” among the workers the “majority of the workforce” was in their mid-30s (Interview X4)

Two incidents sparked discord at the factory. First, in June 2009, the Chengdu government announced that, owing to housing pressures, the plant would have to relocate from near the city center to a suburb, resulting in an increased commute of an hour to an hour and a half for the workers, who lived in neighborhoods close to the old plant. Second, in September 2009, management announced a decrease in the factory's performance bonus, although the standard New Year bonus of 2000 RMB was paid as usual in January 2010. The workers went on strike in February and March for three weeks.

Rather than immediately raising wages or, alternately, cracking down on the protesters, as occurred in other parts of China at the same time, management waited, promising a consideration of the workers' concerns at a later date. It urged employees to return to work with promises of non-retaliation. Phone calls were made to individual workers and the protesters were allowed into the plant for bathroom breaks. But menacing private security guards were also hired. Slowly, discussions with a small group of workers started. Others then trickled back. Workers had to re-sign their contract commitments as a condition of regaining their work. The enterprise's union branch played a marginal role; in a well-worn pattern for the ACFTU, it tipped management off about the strike and encouraged workers to resume production.

After the workers were working again, an increase was made to the base pay and “special” bonuses were added; senior employees were bought out at an “in-between” level that partially acknowledged their pre-joint venture years of service. However, clearly the problem regarding the relocation of the factory was not resolved fully, and neither were the senior workers completely happy with their settlement. After a follow-up slow-down by workers in May 2010, compensation was increased again. In total, the base wage was raised 8.8%; overtime was adjusted 12.2% in line with the base wage; a “special bonus” of 50% replaced a “monthly bonus” of 41%; and other bonuses were increased 25%, for an overall pay raise of 37%. Ninety-five percent of employees agreed to move to the new plant location (company buses now transport the employees from their homes in the old factory's neighborhood).

Our conversations with labor relations staff revealed that the underlying issue was actually about relative wages. Importantly, while wages at the plant had remained high before the strike, they had lost their luster relative to other manufacturers in the city, such as a new Intel computer factory that had opened. What had once been a “privileged” job no longer seemed quite as elite. As the company's global industrial relations director said, the strike was “*not about legal rights; not about other things*” but rather about how it was “*about time to get some more*” (Interview X1).

Zhuzhou Plant: The disputes at the Zhuzhou facility were rooted in a long history of mistrust but began most concretely July 2011, when an employee assaulted a manager with a metal bar over not receiving a merit pay increase. When the worker was terminated, there was a 28-hour slowdown; “*people stayed at their work stations, they didn't walk out in the street with, you know, posters and that... but they refused to work*” (Interview X3). According to an official with the company, “*Having someone that assaults his manager is something, but knowing that... our shop floor employees were supportive of this employee was a kind of surprise for us and this was where we, you know, started being a bit concerned about, you know, what is the issue in this shop? Is there something behind that is more significant?*” (Interview X3). The company started a dialogue process with an ombudsman and focus groups.

While this process was ongoing, a “multi-functional” quality and accounting audit was also underway to assess the factory's compliance with the corporation's standards. Problems were found with preventative equipment maintenance, reimbursements for false receipts for managers (used as a form of motivation), and “fudged” numbers in factory documents. “*The employees really saw that something was wrong*” (Interview X3). The general mismanagement of the factory was compounded in their eyes by issues of favoritism and “*perceived lack of respect from the management team.*” At the end of the year, as investigators finalized recommendations for the factory (including the firing of certain human resources and other personnel), local managers announced that there would be no incentive compensation payouts for 2011 because of the quality issues that had been discovered, issues that workers felt were the fault of management, not line employees. A two-day work stoppage then commenced in January, one that was quite different from that in Chengdu—and from most strikes that appear in news from China.

Whereas the Chengdu plant's union fit the popular stereotype of ineffective or co-opted ACFTU officials, Zhuzhou's union, while led by office workers, was surprisingly assertive. Using the

company's "root cause corrective action" procedures, the union gathered workers in the canteen to do a "deep dive" about why there was no payout (Interviews X1-X4). According to an official, "*When we would say, OK, go back to work, they would say, 'We're not done with our root cause activity.'* So, it was quite a clever trick that I hope that one of our more mature unions doesn't someday decide to employ" (Interview X2). The union reached out to the Zhuzhou Municipal Federation of Trade Unions, which said their tactics were "not the way to go" and instead recommended third party mediation—something the company had no experience with in the Chinese context and was reluctant to try out and which the union felt comfortable ignoring. In the end, the enterprise-level union made a list of demands, including, in addition to bonus plan changes, non-retaliation against workers who participated in the "dive," more open and honest communications with the company in the future and, importantly, a report on what action would be taken against the local management team for various irregularities, not just in regards to pay and human resource strategies, but also in regards to the quality and accounting audit. "Western-style" negotiations via the factory's 22-member Staff and Workers' Representative Congress resolved the stoppage (21 out of 22 members agreed to the company's offers and one abstained; eight of the members belonged to a union negotiating team). Workers received a one-time supplemental payment of one month's wages and a commitment to notification ten days prior to any change to the merit pay plan.

Analysis: There are several interesting outcomes here. (see Table 3 for a comparison of both plants). Both strikes were about monetary issues. The Chengdu dispute was triggered by nonpayment of incentive plans and relocation of the factory, but the underlying causes addressed by the strike was the fall in relative wages compared to other workers in the area. In the Zhuzhou plant, the trigger was the nonpayment of bonuses, but the outcomes centered on a number of "process" dimensions that would strengthen, in the long run, worker voice at the company.

Insert Table 3 about here

The detailed, process-oriented nature of the union's demands surprised the company. In the words of an official, "*One of the things in China, from the experience that I've had now, is that policies, procedures, that type of stuff, you sort of agree on after negotiations—they're not normally part of the negotiation process—and this time around the union made demands that revolved around*

that and we had to come back to them and say, 'Yes, we can look at changing some of these things.' Some of the requests made some sense." The company only agreed to review consultative processes after the negotiations, though, preserving this realm of decision-making for itself.

In addition, relative wages were also an issue in the Zhuzhou plant. Reflecting on the strike, company officials said that while the workers' concerns were mostly "internal" to the factory, employees have also been reacting (like Chengdu's workers) to wage rates in the broader area. In the words of one, *"We've always been a good payer, we're not below the market; in fact, in the past... when we first started there, you know, ten or fifteen years ago... we paid significantly more than other industries,"* such as other facilities run by the company's state-owned joint-venture partner. However, *"over time," the partner "has caught up to our salaries."* Thus, *"There was that in the backdrop, as well: the perception that they [the employees] had been hard done by because everyone had caught up to them and now they weren't earning significantly more than the others"* (Interview X2). The company's global Labor Relations director, talking about both plants, "The examples were different, but the message was the same." Workers simply did not want to lose ground: "That won't be tolerated!" (Interview X1).

In both places, in the words of the company's global industrial relations director, the demand was *"not about rights, not about other things," but rather about it being "time to get some more!"* (Interview X1) Attention was paid to the details of factory life—payments according to factory tenure, distances to be traveled for work, bonus plans, and, in the Zhuzhou case, the competence and honesty of local managers, transparency in auditing processes, and the very processes by which negotiations between labor and management took place. "Pride" was important, too, the director noted in retrospect.

Clearly, these were exceptionally skilled workers with real leverage over their managers. They fit neither the stereotype of migrant workers vulnerable to discrimination nor of old SOE workers fighting battles of "subsistence" (though some workers had roots in the old planned economy). Broader wage changes seem to have been key. Here, the "cognitive cue" was not some practice of the company in question, but rather rising salaries in surrounding factories that ate away at the workers' sense of still being "premium" workers (Interview X1). Company policies, such as its tradition of "root cause corrective action" discussions, seem to have been more immediately important than

broader changes in state policies toward strikes, but alterations in the “political opportunity structure” may have played a background role.

The tactics employed by workers in both cases, finally, were diverse. In Chengdu, strikers gathered outside factory gates to protest. In Zhuzhou, resistance took the form of small acts of violence (attacking a manager with a metal bar), a work slow-down (in support of the worker when he was fired), and a strike disguised as a company evaluation session. An outside actor, the union was included in Zhuzhou; in Chengdu, workers relied on themselves. The detailed focus on process showed by the Zhuzhou workers is interesting, signifying some degree of ‘maturation’ in their collective bargaining. Importantly, neither plant had experienced contention like this in the memory of the company managers interviewed.

Consistent with our interviews with managers, laid-off SOE workers, factory auditors and trade union officials, the data from these two case studies shows a working class that is more pro-active in its demands and sophisticated in its tactics. Wage arrears and “socialist social contracts” were not the issue in either strike; higher wages, pride, and a voice in factory oversight were. The ties between structural changes, as reflected by rising earnings in other, neighboring plants, and worker militancy are clear. Company officials interviewed felt that they were encountering something akin to “traditional” Western-style collective bargaining. According to one official, “*The industrial relations climate in China continues to evolve on an almost daily basis*” (Interview X1).

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews, statistics, and two case studies in this paper suggest, consistent with McAdam (1999), that workers are reacting aggressively to new economic leverage and new political openings for activism. Hiring practices and rising wages send “cues” that working people have more power; greater media coverage of strike and legal changes (or news of legal changes perhaps more than the laws themselves) send “cues” that resistance will not meet with the same level of repression as in the past. As a result, workers are demanding more pay—to keep up with their neighbors as much as to meet some legal or “moral” minimum—as well as greater attention to workplace details, including even the process of negotiations with management, and more respect. These would not be dramatic findings in other contexts, but in China, while conflict has long been intense, workers have until recently focused on “defensive” demands. Clearly, Chinese workers are “going on the offense” with a major focus on

traditional and universal concerns of workers such as bread and butter issues and increased respect. Like Gompers (1893) commented, Chinese workers “want more.” And they may not hope to be “master” again, but they clearly expect a greater say over the conditions of their employment.

We acknowledge the basic problems with the data used in the paper. However, it is the best data that exists, and this situation will not improve until the government begins to systematically collect strike statistics (or make public such statistics if it is already collecting them). What this data reveals is, first, a rise in strikes and protests, and second, a discernible shift in the causes of worker collective actions, from more defensive and spontaneous reactions to more organized campaigns dealing with economic issues. And the gains have been significant. In a majority of strikes and protests, the end result was a double-digit wage increase, often higher. These successes will only be emulated as, in McAdam’s terms, more cognitive cues are provided for workers. Successful cross-factory actions like that of the Pepsi bottling plant workers in November 2011 will also likely spur imitation, barring a harsh government crackdown. This sort of coordinated activism has the greatest potential for raising issues beyond the enterprise level.

Although we interpret the demands for higher wages as evidence of “workers going on the offensive” an alternative interpretation is that these are actually “defensive” demands in that workers are just trying to keep real wages constant. However, we disagree with this alternative interpretation for two reasons. First, our case studies demonstrate a wholistic change in workers demands, they are not only about wages. Second, in many of the cases the actual increase received by workers in the strikes we highlight represent a significant *increase* in real wages.⁹

An interesting question for future research is whether or not as labor activism evolves it will be consistent with the parts of McAdam’s model that we have not tested in this paper. Will “indigenous organizations” serving Chinese workers reinforce the “cognitive cues” sent by changing structural and political conditions, as black churches and local NAACP chapters did in McAdam's study of the Civil Rights Movement? If so, will the different organizations available to workers, such as native place associations, the mafia, and NGOs, direct labor toward different tactics? The key question for future

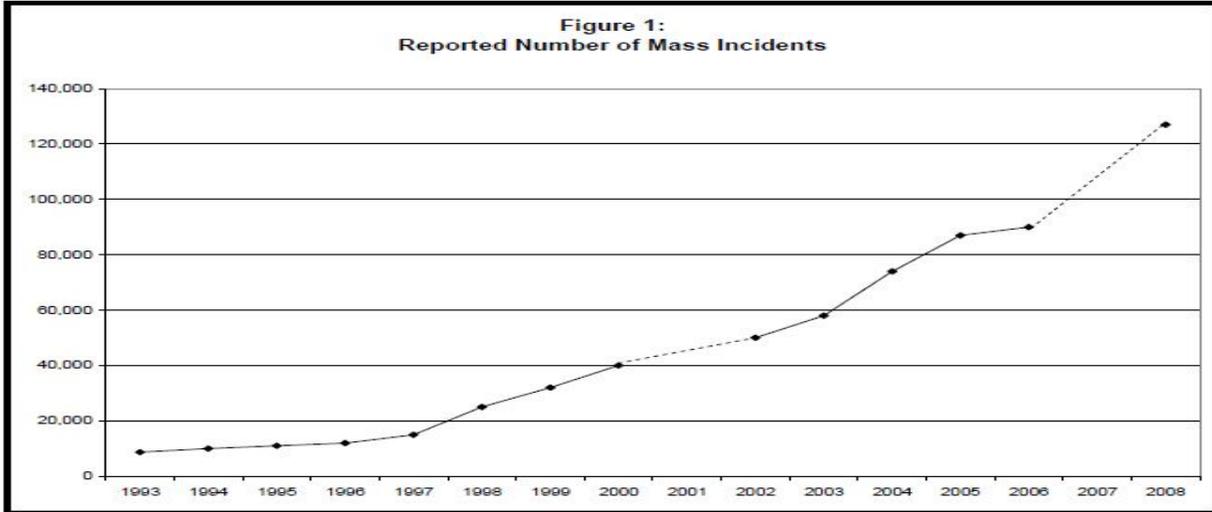
⁹ According to the World Bank, China's annual consumer price index (CPI) inflation rose from 4.8 percent to 5.9 percent between 2007 and 2008, crashed into the negative zone (-0.7) in 2009, following the global financial crisis, and rose again to 3.3 percent in 2010 (World Bank 2012). In July 2011, CPI hit a high of 6.5 percent, according to Chinese government figures (Rafiei 2012). However, the massive wage increases granted to workers following the Honda strike wave and after several other strikes and protests appear to us to reflect more ambition on the part of workers than merely keeping real wages constant.

research, though, lies in the dark black arrows leading back from “new tactics” to the “new structural and political opportunities” on the left hand side of the diagram in Figure 3, which represents our adaption of McAdam’s model to the Chinese labor context. Social movements scholars have emphasized that not only do “political opportunity structures” shape movements, but movements also shape opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McAdam 1999). Though Beijing’s policy making process is notoriously opaque, it seems reasonable to argue that the passage of the 2008 Labor Contract Law was in large part the result of growing labor unrest. Strikes in the auto sector in 2010, in particular, may have been factors in the rising minimum wages of the Pearl River Delta and elsewhere. Workers’ current “individualism via collective means” may further change the opportunities for further action in a positive direction. While disentangling the endogeneity of increasing labor activism, on the one hand, and the promulgation of pro-labor legislation and the improvement of working conditions, on the other, presents a headache for social scientists, the fact that the tangle exists at all points to a virtuous cycle from the perspective of workers.

It is also important to think of how changes in the economic and structural features that have raised bargaining power of workers could also work to reduce them. Employers are pursuing a variety of strategies to deal with the labor shortage. Already, Foxconn has put in an order for one million robots to replace parts of its problematic Chinese workforce beginning in 2013 (The Economist 2011). Many industries on the coast are moving inland, including Foxconn. Recent months have brought a rash of layoffs in China, as factories feel the sting of slackening global demand (driven by the European financial crisis) and tight credit. There is thus a danger for workers that gains can be reversed. That said, it would appear that collective bargaining over bread and butter issues is taking root in China.

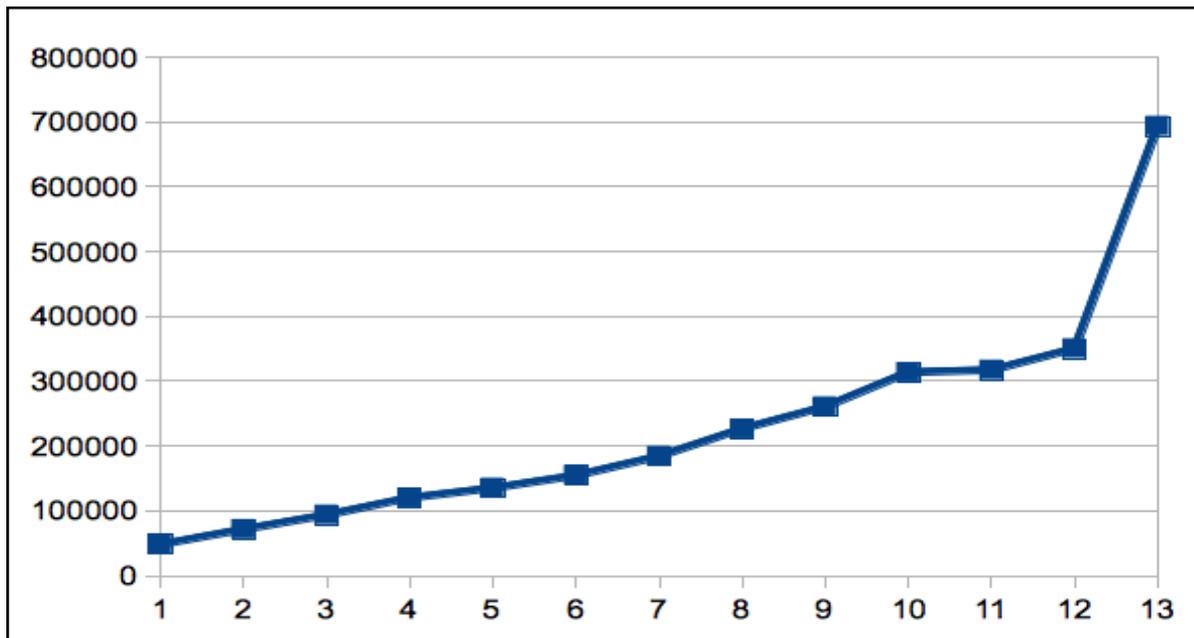
TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: “Mass Incidents”



Source: Wedeman (2009)

Figure 2. : Labor Disputes Accepted for Mediation, Arbitration and Court 1996-2008



Source: China Labour Statistical Yearbook (2009)

Table 1: Number of Strikes January 2008 to March 2012

| Year | Number of Strikes | Number of Strikes for Higher wages | Number of Strikes for OT and Speedups | Average Number of Strikes Per Month |
|----------------|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| 2008 | 41 | 2 | 5 | 3.42 |
| 2009 | 24 | 6 | 0 | 2.0 |
| 2010 | 74 | 32 | 8 | 6.17 |
| 2011 | 220 | 40 | 25 | 18.33 |
| 2012 Jan-March | 76 | 22 | 6 | 25.33 |

Source: China Strikes (2012)

Table 2. Number of Strikes, Different Studies

| | Wedeman | C. Chen | CLB | China Strikes |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|----------------------|
| Period Covered | 1990-2008 | 1997-2007 | 2000-2010 | 2008-2012 March |
| Number of Incidents | 345 | 355 | 553 | 435 |
| Number of Years | 18 | 10 | 10 | 3.3 |
| Number of Months | 216 | 120 | 120 | 39 |
| Strikes /Month | 1.59 | 2.95 | 4.60 | 11.15 |
| Strikes per year | 19.16 | 29.58 | 46.08 | 131.81 |

Source: Wedeman (2009), C.Chen (2009), China Labour Bulletin (2012), China Strikes (2012)

Figure 3: A “Political Process” Model of Chinese Labor Activism Based on McAdam (1999)

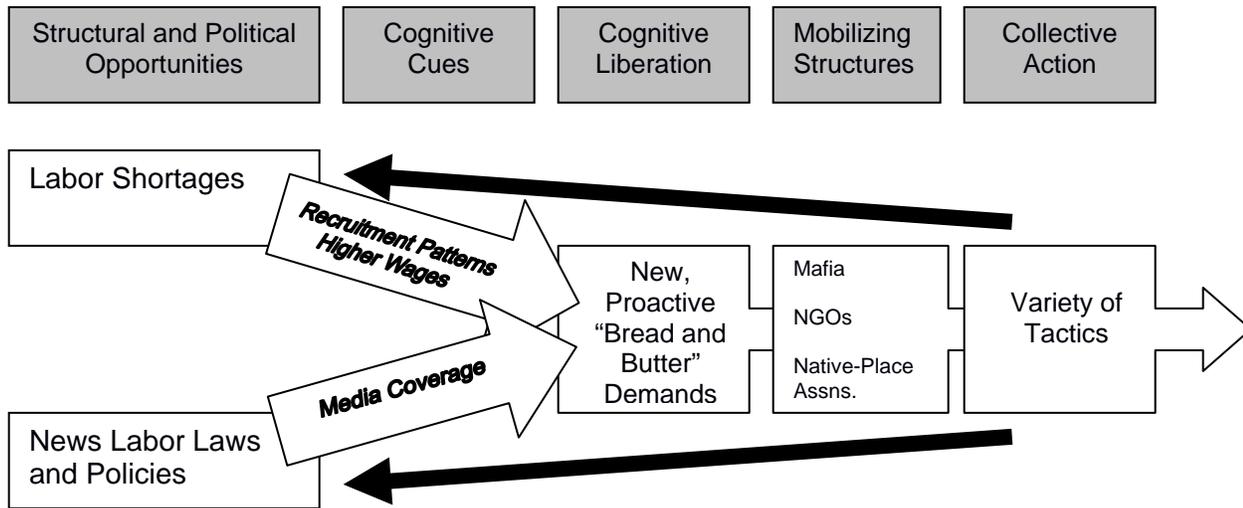
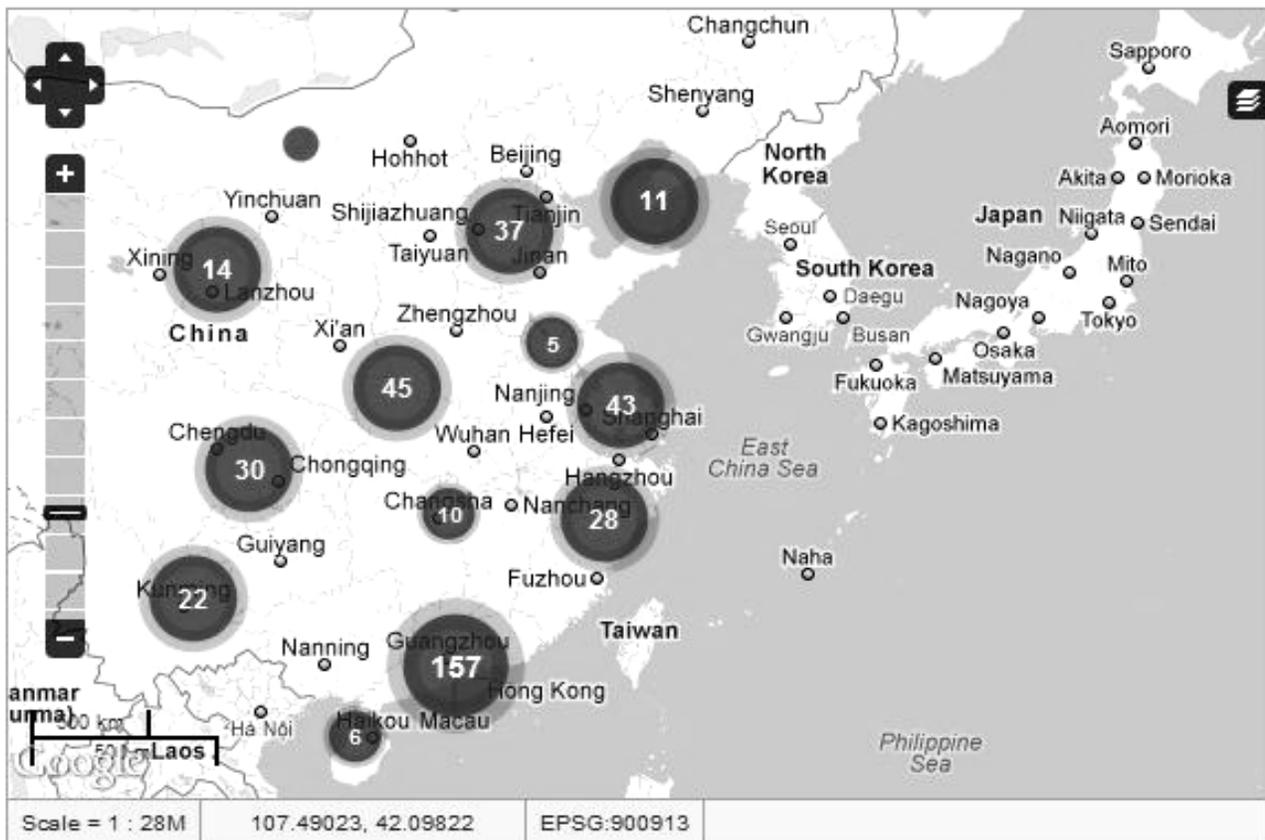


Figure 4: Geographic Distribution of All Strikes and Protests by Workers, January 2008 to March 2012



**Figures 5-7: Strikes and Protests by Workers in Specific Sectors
January 2008 to March 2012**

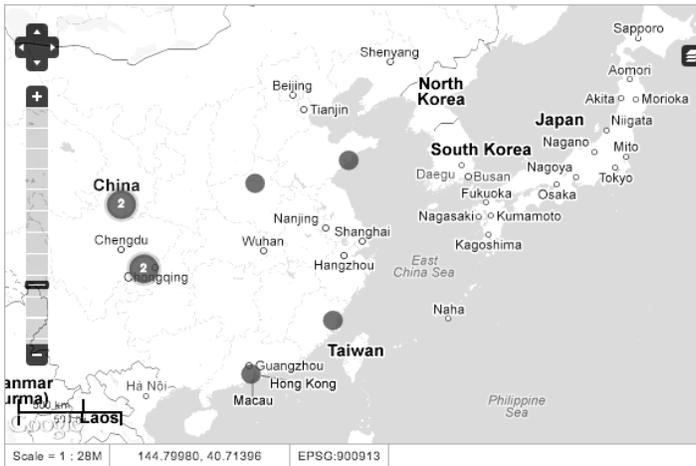


Figure 5: Steel

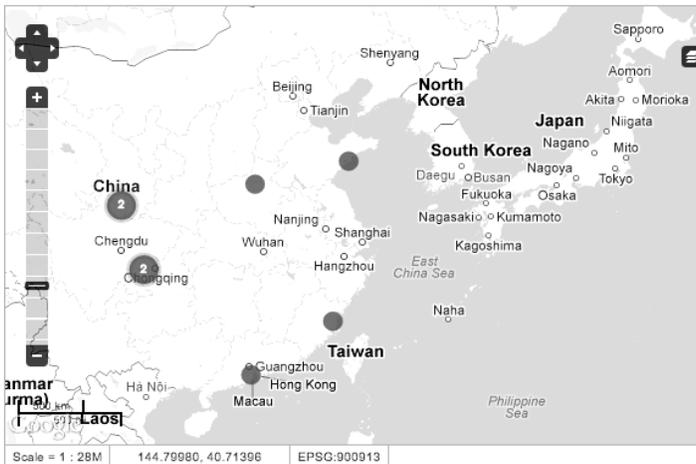


Figure 6: Chemical and Fertilizer



Figure 7: Auto Strikes

Table 3: Chengdu and Zhuzhou Case Studies

| City, Ownership & Workers | Reasons for Strike | Demands | Action | Role of Union | Result |
|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Chengdu</p> <p>Wholly Foreign-Owned</p> <p>405 Employees</p> | <p>Performance bonus cut</p> <p>Transfer of factory across city</p> <p>Neighboring factories catching up in terms of wages</p> | <p>Restoration of performance bonus</p> <p>Transfer compensation based on service before joint venture</p> | <p>Three-week strike followed by two week slowdown</p> | <p>Telling company about planned strike</p> <p>Ineffectively urging workers to return to work</p> | <p>Indirect increase in bonuses</p> <p>Older, pre-joint venture employees compensated for past service</p> <p>Net wage increases of 37%</p> |
| <p>Zhuzhou</p> <p>Joint Venture</p> <p>320 Employees</p> | <p>Performance Bonus Cut</p> <p>Termination of Worker for Assaulting Manager</p> <p>Local Management Team Irregularities</p> | <p>Restoration of incentive bonus</p> <p>More communication on pay issues</p> <p>Different process for negotiation</p> <p>Transparent accounting of local managers' failures</p> | <p>Small act of violence</p> <p>Work to grievance procedure rule via a two day "dive"</p> | <p>Staff and Workers Representative Congress leads action</p> <p>Negotiating a new agreement via the Staff and Workers representative Congress</p> | <p>Promise of prior announcement of pay changes</p> <p>One months supplemental wage payment</p> <p>No retaliation against striking workers</p> <p>More open and honest communication</p> <p>Share report on actions taken against corrupt managers.</p> |

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